

## Abstract

Many students have difficulties in comprehending texts. Some students can adequately decode but are not able to display any level of comprehension. There is a significant step in learning that takes a reader from the level of a competent decoder to that of a good reader who can understand and use the text they are reading.

The hypothesis of this study is that the **explicit teaching of the use of synonyms and paraphrasing to grade 3/4 students who display reading difficulties will improve their comprehension.**

Research tells us that paraphrasing is an effective strategy which helps students to improve their reading comprehension. The effective use of synonyms can help students to change a text into their own words and better link the text to their own experiences or prior knowledge. This can support the student in making sense or meaning from what they read.

This study used 12 grade 3 & 4 students as an intervention and control group to examine the difference that this explicit teaching might make to comprehension. All students were struggling readers. A considerable amount of time was spent on the teaching and use of synonyms to support the paraphrasing strategy. The **RAP** acronym was taught to students in the intervention group to help them recall the steps required to paraphrase. **R**ead the text, **A**sk yourself about the main ideas of the text, and **P**ut it into your own words.

The results indicated that the strategy was successful and the comprehension scores of all students in the intervention group improved. The results indicated that the use of synonyms was a skill that all of the students in both the intervention and control groups were able to master with some degree of confidence. This was promising as this ability strongly supports the paraphrasing strategy.

The results of this study indicated that the use of the RAP acronym to help recall was useful within this strategy for these grade 3 & 4 students. The results also suggest that a longer and more consistent approach to the intervention would be necessary for students to gain the necessary skills to become proficient paraphrasers and gain the best benefit from the use of this strategy. The evidence also suggested that successful understanding and use of the paraphrasing strategy and therefore better comprehension was dependent on explicit teaching.

## **Introduction**

Reading comprehension is a challenge for many young readers in our schools. The emphasis in recent years in catholic schools has been firmly based on giving young students strong skills in decoding. The resulting product which has emerged seems to be indicating that we have managed to produce young readers who are proficient and confident decoders but who lack the important skills required to comprehend the texts that they are reading.

Harris and Hodges (1995) in their Literacy Dictionary define comprehension as a process in which the reader constructs meaning by interacting with text. It would seem that there is often very little interaction taking place as our emerging readers churn through the decoding process to often emerge at the other end of the text with little understanding of what has occurred in it or any of the inferences or underlying concepts that may be within it. Gee (1998) states that reading is an active involvement with the text that results in comprehension and that not all readers acquire strategies automatically and need explicit instructions. The strategies that scaffold comprehension do not seem to have been explicitly taught as part of the model adopted in most catholic junior school classrooms over the last eight to ten years.

This research seeks to explore the strategy of paraphrasing and the use of synonyms as a vehicle to improving the comprehension levels of students in grade three and four who are at varying levels of competency in their decoding abilities but display reading difficulties.

Paraphrasing is one of the strategies that can be a great support to young readers. The Paraphrasing strategy has been demonstrated to significantly increase the reading comprehension of students with and without learning difficulties. (Katims and Harris 1997) Katims and Harris cite the work of Ellis and Graves in 1990 (Katims and Harris 1997) where research found that the use of the paraphrasing strategy significantly enhanced the reading comprehension of a group of middle school students with learning difficulties. They go on to find significant improvements in reading comprehension in their own research after explicitly teaching the paraphrasing strategy to middle school students in a classroom situation. (Katims & Harris 1997)

Paraphrasing is the restating or rewriting of a text into your own words and it aims to generate a literal representation of a sentence read by substituting as many words and phrases in it as is necessary. (Munro, 2004) Fisk and Hurst (2003) state that paraphrasing is genuine rewriting which involves students being able to express the main ideas of a passage or text in their own

words, it is not meant to be a word for word translation. This movement from substituting words or synonyms to expressing the same meaning in a completely different way is an enormous step in learning.

Paraphrasing is a strategy used at the sentence and paragraph level in the Multiple Levels of Text Processing model (Munro, 2005). Munro (2005) states that working on synonyms before paraphrasing assists the students in retelling a sentence, as they are able to begin to link new concepts to concepts that they already know and make sense of meaning within the scope of their current understanding. Comprehension is distinctly different to memorising what happened in a text. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) state that it is about selecting the most important parts of the text and being able to link this to known understandings and prior knowledge. The paraphrasing strategy supports this as it aims to convert a text into vocab and ideas that are already known to the reader and can therefore be more easily comprehended. In each case the research strongly acknowledges the importance of that link to prior knowledge or things that the student already understands as an important step in making sense of new texts.

The Paraphrasing strategy developed by Schumaker, Denton & Deshler (1984) is an after reading strategy that helps the reader to recall the facts of the text and the events that are contained in it and make meaning from them. The acronym RAP outlines the three basic steps within the strategy and can be an effective metacognitive tool to prompt the reader and support their use of the strategy.

**R**ead the text

**A**sk yourself what were the main ideas and details in the text

**P**ut the main ideas into your own words

This acronym can reinforce the self-talk that encourages students to use the strategies taught. It is important that the student understands the reason why they are using these reading strategies and is able to verbalise these reasons so that there is purpose in the learning. Students will be more inclined to use a strategy that they KNOW is useful as opposed to one that they are told will help them. Fisk and Hurst (2003) state that students will benefit not only from knowing why paraphrasing is helpful but that actually seeing the practical applications of accurately restating another person's ideas and this will motivate them to use the strategy more readily.

Katims and Harris (1997) in their study, researched the use of the RAP acronym as a way of supporting students in remembering the steps to use in paraphrasing. Their findings support the teaching in ordinary classrooms of a cognitively based paraphrasing strategy to improve reading comprehension.

Improving reading comprehension involves the crucial element of explicit teaching. Reading is more than decoding and students need structure to give them cues to know which strategies to use. Duke (2003) discusses five necessary components for effective teaching of comprehension strategies.

- ❑ Explicit description of the strategy and its use /purpose
- ❑ Teacher /Student modelling of the strategy in action
- ❑ Collaborative use of the strategy in action
- ❑ Guided practice using the strategy and gradual release of responsibility to the learner.
- ❑ Independent use of the strategy.

With these five components in mind, the teaching of the use of paraphrasing and the trigger acronym RAP can ensure that students can have their learning scaffolded into basic steps that encourage successful implementation of the strategy.

Munro (2004) states that it is generally agreed that a knowledge of how to predict, self question, infer, summarise, visualise and monitor comprehension facilitates reading comprehension. (Dole, Duffy, Roehler & Pearson, 1991; cited in Munro, 2004) Students need to have a sound understanding and proficiency in a range of reading strategies if they are to have the best opportunity to interact with the text at a meaning level and they need a knowledge of when to use them. These strategies to support comprehension need to be explicitly taught and will need to be acquired at a word, sentence, conceptual, topic and dispositional level if the reader is to become proficient in comprehending all types of text. (Munro, 2005. Multiple Levels of Text Processing Model)

It is evident that many students with reading difficulties do not have the skills to adequately comprehend texts. This inability to make sense of it at even a basic word or sentence level will often affect the self-efficacy of students and therefore their ability to stay on task and persevere with the task. The use of specific learning strategies helps students

maintain interest and concentration during many learning tasks. (Clark et al, 1984; Nelson and Smith, 1992 as cited in Parker et al. 2002) Students are able to lean on a familiar process to scaffold their learning.

This study aims to investigate the teaching of the paraphrasing strategy and the use of synonyms which will give the students another strategy to use to help them to move past the basic decoding stage in their reading. It will investigate a strategy that seeks to empower students to be able to gain meaning from what they read.

The hypothesis is that the explicit teaching of the use of synonyms and paraphrasing to grade 3/4 students who display reading difficulties will improve their comprehension.

## **Method**

### **Design**

This study uses an OXO design. The progress in reading comprehension is monitored following the explicit teaching of paraphrasing as a reading strategy and the teaching and use of synonyms to support this strategy. Two groups of children in grades 3 & 4 with reading difficulties were used as an intervention and control group in this study.

### **Participants.**

The students chosen for this study are in grade three and four in primary school. Their ages range from eight years and three months to nine years and five months.( Appendix 1.) Students were chosen on the basis of being firstly identified by the classroom teachers as students who would benefit from assistance in developing their skills in understanding texts and secondly students who were not highly skilled at decoding but nevertheless able to decode more basic texts.

All students from grade 3 & 4 were tested using the Torch test and these results were also used to help identify suitable students to be involved in this study. All students chosen, other than one, scored between stanine 4-6 for their grade level on this test.

Students who were eligible were invited to be a part of this study if they wished. Six students were chosen to be in both the intervention and control groups.

## **Materials**

For the purpose of this study four pre test scores were obtained to help give an accurate understanding of the abilities of each of the students in both the intervention and control groups. The Reading Progress Test, Torch Test, Paraphrasing and synonym tasks (Munro)

### **Torch Comprehension Test.**

Grade 3	Grasshoppers
Grade 4	Lizards love Eggs
Grade 3/4	At the zoo

### **Reading Progress Test ( Denis Vincent, Mary Crumpler, Mike de la Mare)**

These tests are British Tests which have been re-normed to suit Australian grades and ages and are based on the national sample of students included in the ACER Project on “Curriculum and Organisation in the Early Years of School.” ( De Lemos, 1996)

This test was very difficult for the students and all students were subsequently tested at level 2 regardless of grade.

### **Paraphrasing Task**

John Munro. Group Test

### **Synonyms Task**

John Munro. Group Test

### **Fiction and non fiction texts were used.**

The Talent Quest. By Jenny Giles, PM Level 24

Food Chains by Julie Hayden ( Focus 5 Set A)

Troy's Movie by Joy Cowley. Big Book  
Our Solar System by Julie-Anne Justus  
Weather – Rain and Us by Jillian Powell

Fry Readability Procedure was used to assess suitable text levels.

## **Procedure**

The students were selected for the study as per the participants section of this report. Existing results from the Torch tests were used as suitable pre-test scores. The Torch tests were conducted on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2008.

After being selected for this study all students were also tested using the Reading Progress test at level 3. This test was found to be very difficult for most of the children and it was decided that all children would be tested at the level 2 test. Children were given about an hour to complete this test which was given to an entire class of grade 3/4 children at the one time. One hour was more than enough time for most of the children and those who had not finished had completed as much as they were able to do.

All 12 children involved in the study were then tested using the Paraphrasing and Synonyms Tests (Munro) and the results were collected and recorded.

From the test results and the advice of the classroom teachers, the intervention and control groups were established. Both the intervention and control groups were as balanced as possible given the available data.

The control group would continue to participate in normal English classes based on the 2 hour literacy block used throughout the school.

The Intervention group was involved in 10 lessons based on the Paraphrasing teaching Strategy (Munro 2005). This strategy involved the students participating in lessons explicitly teaching the use of synonyms as substitute words in sentences to enhance their understanding of the text and paraphrasing of sentences and paragraphs within a text to clarify the meaning for students in their own words and thus their comprehension of the text. It should be noted that the scoring of the paraphrasing test involved simply adding the number of synonyms

correctly used in the sentences as the students were not proficient in rewording the sentences in any other way.

Ten sessions were taught incorporating this strategy. ( Appendix 2) These sessions were completed over a short period of time to investigate whether a short, intense series of lessons might have a significant affect on comprehension. The ten sessions were completed over 12 days with two sessions being taken on one of those days. Each teaching session involved withdrawing the six students from their normal classes at a time other than the literacy block. Each session was approximately 30 minutes in duration.

During the teaching sessions a number of different fiction and non fiction texts were used and children practised the paraphrasing technique in a repetitive manner. Students were taught the meaning of the terms synonym and paraphrase and were introduced to the acronym RAP which was the key to them remembering the steps required to successfully paraphrase.

**Read the text**

**Ask yourself questions about the text detail and main ideas**

**Put the ideas into your own words changing as many as you can.**

As lessons progressed and the students became more familiar with the process, the lessons moved from using synonyms to replace words within texts to substituting many words to keep the same meaning and message in the text.

The first three sessions concentrated on the meanings of words and substituting words keeping the context the same or as similar as possible. These sessions were mainly oral sessions which relaxed hesitant writers. Texts with relatively common themes and topics were chosen to allow students to draw on existing knowledge. All the texts were chosen after using the Fry Readability Procedure to give an accurate level and assess suitability.

Sessions 4-10 progressed from the sentence to paragraph level and moved from oral to written responses as the students became more confident. In this instance spelling issues were not concentrated on in order to develop confidence to “have a go” at the tasks.

The relevance of strong metacognitive structures and the importance of positive self efficacy were serious considerations in the planning of the ten sessions. Students were asked to articulate their learning and the reasons why what they had learned were important at the conclusion of every session.

At the conclusion of the 10 intervention sessions the students were assessed again using the Torch test, Reading Progress Test, Paraphrasing and Synonym tests to gauge changes in performance in the area of comprehension.

## **Results**

The results do support the Hypothesis that reading comprehension can be improved for students in grade 3 & 4 with reading difficulties by the teaching of the use of synonyms and paraphrasing. The post test comprehension scores in the Torch test and Reading Progress test demonstrate an improvement in results for all students involved in the intervention group. The results in the same tests for the control; group are considerably different with only 3 students displaying any real gains; however it should be noted that there were significant reasons that affected student G & H in the control group during the course of the study.

The students from both groups were keen to be involved at the beginning of the study. The interest by the control group students however was significantly lower once they realised that they were not participating in the regular intervention sessions and their disappointment was clearly demonstrated in their comments to me as the study progressed and their approach to the post testing activities. On the other hand the approach of the intervention group was very positive as they quickly recognised that they had a learning and practice advantage over the other students. There was no competitive aspect to this study but it was noticeable that the attitude to the work significantly affected the results at the post testing stage.

Figure 1 shows that student A demonstrated significant improvement in results in the Torch test. He moved from the 44<sup>th</sup> to the 73<sup>rd</sup> percentile and answered 20% more questions accurately. This improvement is significant as the questions where improvement was demonstrated are those where more inferential responses are required and this shows a higher level of text processing for comprehension. This was very pleasing given this student's history of Reading Recovery intervention and reading difficulty. Student A was enthusiastic throughout the study and participated well in all of the lessons during the intervention. This student was able to demonstrate a significant improvement in knowledge and use of synonyms with a pre & post scores moving from 44 -62. The improvement in scores in the paraphrasing test from 16 – 20 demonstrated the beginnings of a better understanding of the use of paraphrasing as a strategy to support his reading. It must be noted that this student was

still only able to paraphrase at a level where he was substituting synonyms within sentences and only occasionally was a sentence reworded to the extent that it looked significantly different whilst maintaining the meaning. This student was able to articulate his positive feelings towards the strategies he had used and enjoyed the process. The results demonstrated in the Reading Progress test were also significant for this student with his percentile scores moving from 17<sup>th</sup> – 86<sup>th</sup> percentile. This test was normed to Australian norms and relatively close to his correct age for the test.

The results of student B and D were quite similar to those of student A with significant increases in the scores of the synonym, paraphrasing and Torch tests but only a minor improvement in the results of the Reading Progress test. Both Student B & D were also very enthusiastic throughout the study and keen to improve. Their ability to paraphrase a sentence or paragraph at the post test stage was also limited to an extension of the use of synonyms rather than a complete rewording of the text to maintain the original meaning. Both of these students are still operating at a level which enables them to begin to make inferential decisions within a text but predominantly draw from more explicitly stated information.

Student Coding	Para Pre	Para Post	Synon Pre	Synon Post	Torch Raw Pre	Torch Raw Post	Torch % Pre	Torch % Post	Torch Stanine pre	Torch Stanine Post	Reading Prog pre	Reading Progress % pre	Reading Progress Post	Reading Progress % Post
A	16	20	44	62	12/19	16/19	44%	73%	5	6	13	17%	28	86%
B	12	23	48	64	11/19	13/19	38%	51%	4	5	21	46%	22	51%
D	13	17	24	78	9/20	11/20	23%	38%	4	4	22	51%	26	74%

**Figure 1**

Student C demonstrated a significant improvement in the synonym activity and an improvement in the score of the paraphrasing activity. ( Figure 2 ) Her interest in the tasks during the sessions was not as great as the other students in the intervention group and she tended to daydream throughout tasks. It was important to keep bringing her back to the activity during the teaching sessions. This student demonstrated a lower score in the Torch Post test and did not show any great interest in the task. The disinterest in completing this test showed in her results and she articulated that she didn't feel like it. Student C does have difficulty in interpreting the texts that she is given and this is often made more difficult by the ESL language background that she comes from. Student C speaks English at home usually but her mother speaks consistently in Vietnamese. This student is quite good at following

explicit directions and demonstrated this in the Synonym and Paraphrasing tasks but does find it difficult to make sense of the text as a whole when trying to pull the overall meaning together. It was interesting to note that this student did demonstrate a significant improvement in the score of the Reading Progress test correctly answering 8 more questions accurately and moving from the 51<sup>st</sup> -95<sup>th</sup> percentile. It must be kept in mind that this test is at a mean age of 8.1 where student C is the oldest of the students involved in this study at 9.6 years. This Reading Progress test is aimed at the end of year 2 in Australia; Student C is now in grade 4. It could be expected that she may have scored more highly as she was more familiar with the test format and content over this relatively short study period.

Student Coding	Para Pre	Para Post	Synon Pre	Synon Post	Torch Raw Pre	Torch Raw Post	Torch % Pre	Torch % Post	Torch Stanine pre	Torch Stanine Post	Reading Prog pre	Reading Progress % pre	Reading Progress Post	Reading Progress % Post
C	11	14	25	56	15/20	13/20	67%	50%	6	5	22	51%	30	95%
E	24	29	33	46	9/19	9/19	28%	28%	4	4	18	33%	18	33%

**Figure 2**

Student E did not demonstrate the same significant gains as student A,B,C and D. (Figure 2) Her enthusiasm was high and she was actively engaged in all of the activities but her results do not demonstrate a great improvement in comprehension. Student E asked many questions during the sessions and was often not sure of why we were doing the activities even though she was able to clearly articulate the ideas we had discussed. This student demonstrated a difficulty that I believe is often true for our ESL students. They seem very competent in remembering facts, rules and processes but find difficulty in pulling he strands together to actually comprehend what it all means as one piece of learning, conversation or in this case one text meaning.

Student E did demonstrate some improvement in both the synonym and paraphrasing tasks (Figure 2) but interestingly remained on exactly the same scores for both the Torch and Reading Progress tests. Interestingly, this student gained the highest score in the paraphrasing activity both pre & post test even though her gains in other areas were not as substantial and her comprehension results remain in the lowest in this sample. Student E requires not only more practice in using synonyms and paraphrasing but also needs to be more able to understand the use of these strategies and see how they are able to help her learning and therefore encourage their actual practical use. This student is still operating at a level which

enables her to gin the main idea form a text if there are explicit references in the text but she is not able to make inferences or find the general message of the author from a given text.

Student F proved to be an interesting student to have in this study. She was very reserved and serious throughout the lessons and keen to learn. It was difficult to ascertain whether she was enjoying the lessons or just so involved that she did not have time for fun. Student F did however make some excellent gains in her comprehension tests and the synonym and paraphrasing tests.( Figure 3) It was noticeable that even though the paraphrasing test was scored as the number of synonyms used within the text she was one of the few to include numerous examples of texts that were actually rewritten in her own words with the meaning maintained instead of just substituting synonyms into an identical text format. This was extremely pleasing and encouraging both for me and the student as she has displayed reading difficulties for a long time and struggled with the Reading Recovery Program.

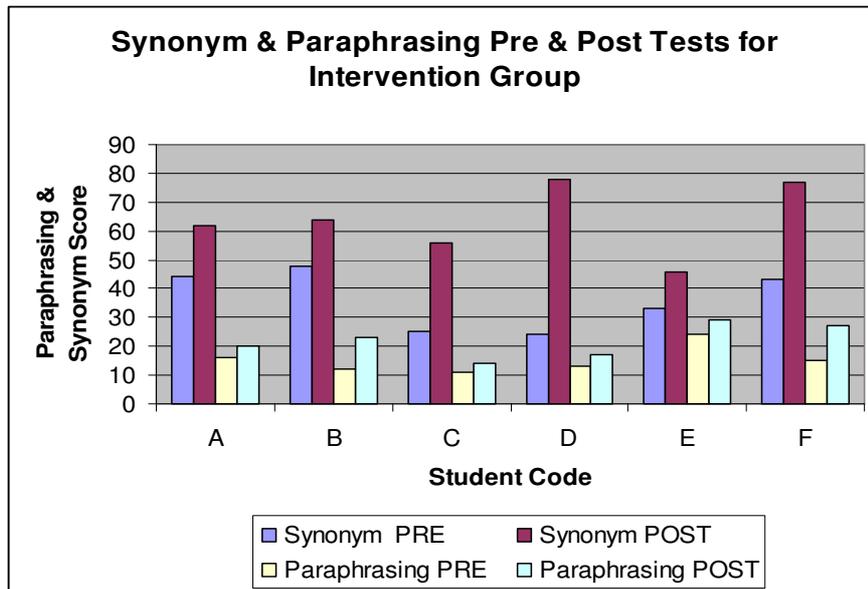
Student F displayed an improvement in her Torch results. (Figure 3) Her initial test using Lizards Love Eggs was very difficult for her at a decoding level and it was decided to test her using Grasshoppers at the post test level to make the decoding process a little more realistic. She was able to answer 7 more questions accurately in the Reading Progress Test which was also pleasing even though her results are still low for a grade 4 student using an end of grade 2 test.

Student Coding	Para Pre	Para Post	Synon Pre	Synon Post	Torch Raw Pre	Torch Raw Post	Torch % Pre	Torch % Post	Torch Stanine pre	Torch Stanine Post	Reading Prog pre	Reding Progress % pre	Reading Progress Post	Reading Progress % Post
F	15	27	43	77	7/20	15/19	9%	65%	4	6	13	17%	20	41%

**Figure 3**

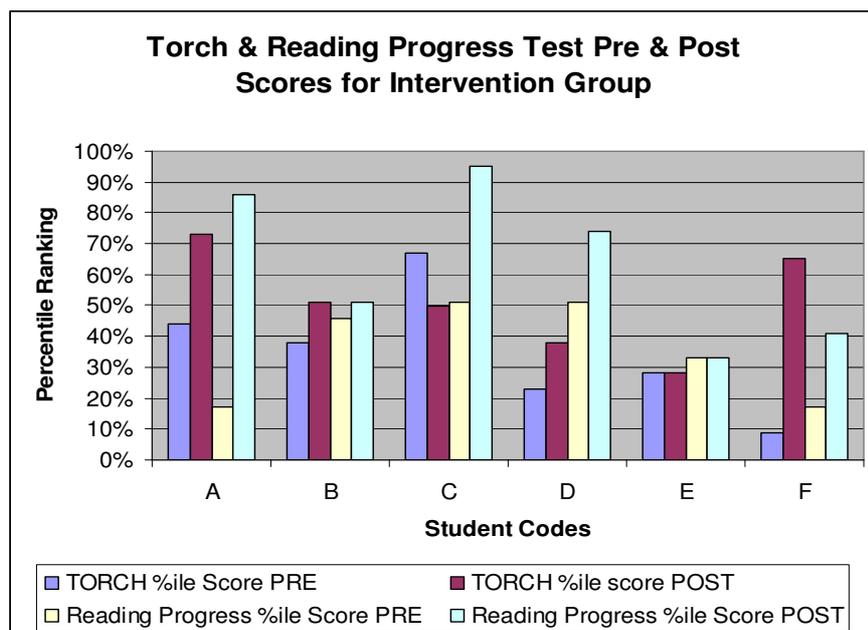
The overall results for both the Synonym and Paraphrasing tasks for the intervention group were encouraging. All of the students gained a good understanding of the use of synonyms and all were able to use them in texts at a sentence level. Figure 4 gives an indication of the progress made by the intervention group. It can be questioned as to whether there is a good understanding of what is happening at a paragraph level at this stage of their learning. The improvements in scores were not as great in the paraphrasing test probably due to the fact that these students do have comprehension difficulties and this task does require them to gain an understanding of the sentence before finding a suitable synonym whereas the synonym task requires no context for the synonym. Most of the student s had difficulty with the meanings of

some of the words in both tests and the text and vocab was read to the students during the tests.



**Figure 4**

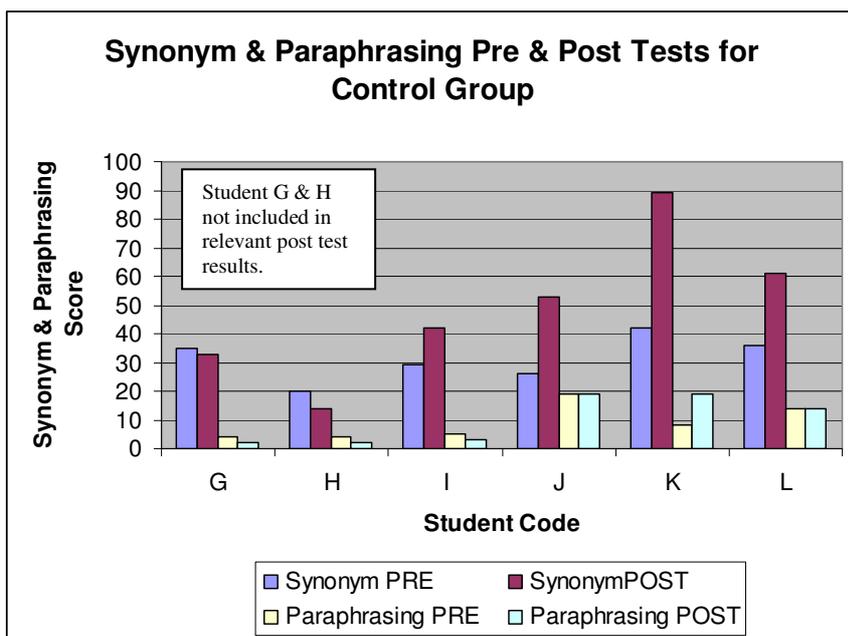
The comprehension results using both the Torch and Reading Progress tests were also pleasing as they did demonstrate improvement in all tests except for student C which showed a lower result in the Torch post test and student E who had test results in both tests which were unchanged. (Figure 5)



**Figure 5**

The Control group results were significantly different to the Intervention group. There was significantly less enthusiasm for the testing and involvement and this reflected in the results. Student G remained in the study but had a drastic change in medication due to an allergic reaction during the course of the study and she was basically unable to participate in the study. Her results were recorded in order that her self efficacy as a student in the study was maintained but these results are not really relevant to the study. Student H also was not able to adequately complete the study as she became completely unable to participate in the lessons due to an existing medical condition.

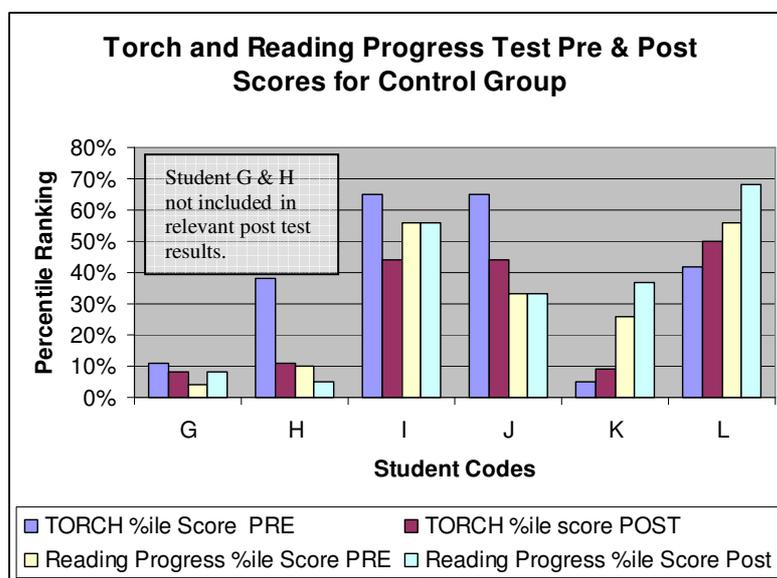
Students I, J, K and L all improved in their synonym tests even without the explicit testing that the other group had experienced. ( Figure 6 ) Student K particularly improved, scoring higher in the synonym task than any of the students in the intervention group who had achieved a similar pre test score to her. Students A,B and F all scored 40+ in the pre test but were not as high as the 89 scored by student K.



**Figure 6**

Only student K from the control group improved in their paraphrasing test score over the study period. Student J & L gained the exact score they had recorded pre test and this could be expected. Student K improved her score considerably over the study period and this was a pleasing result for a student who had also struggled in reading Recovery for quite a period of time. Student K's results indicate that she could benefit greatly from some explicit instruction

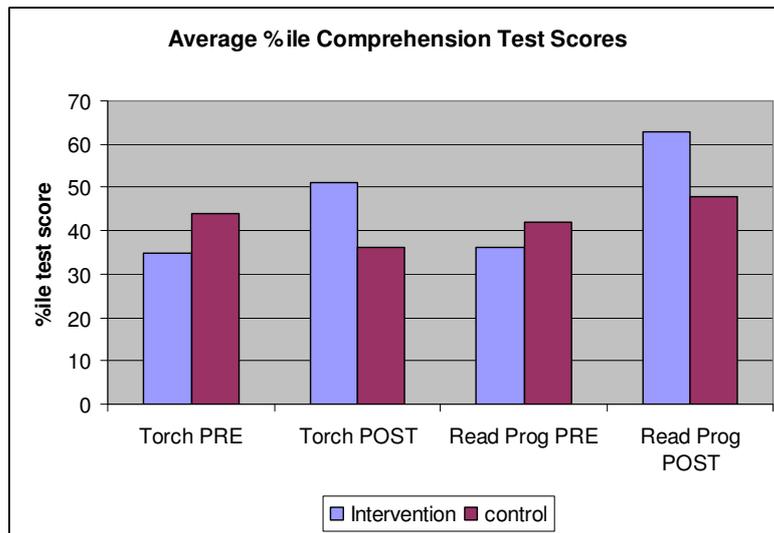
in this area as her improvement had been considerable without this instruction. The Comprehension scores for students I & J actually dropped on the Torch tests for this period and the reading progress scores remained exactly the same as the pre test scores. Student K & L improved in both the Torch and Reading Progress tests over the study period. (Figure 7) Student G & H scores were not considered relevant due to the factors already stated.



**Figure 7**

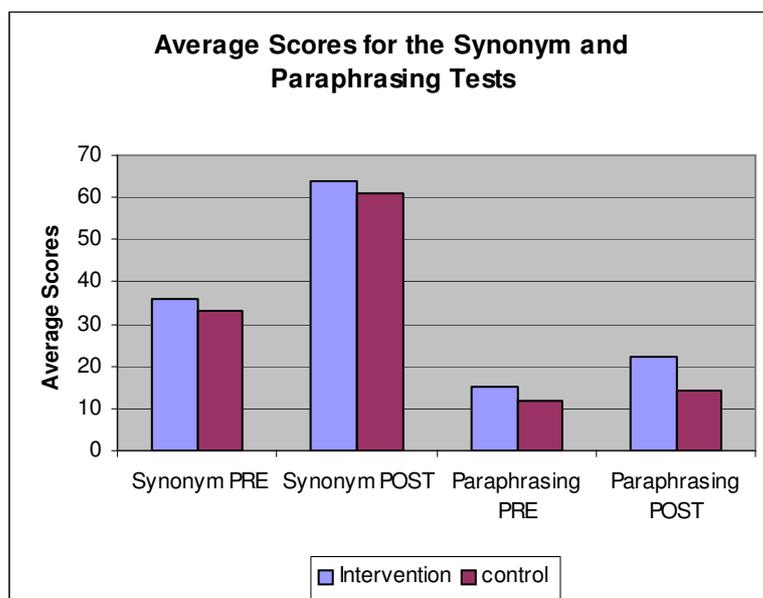
Comparatively the difference in results between the intervention and control groups are considerable and support the hypothesis that explicit teaching will make a difference in comprehension levels. A comparison of results shows clearly the difference in improvement between the intervention and control groups. There was a consistent positive average improvement in both comprehension tests for the intervention group whereas the control group saw a significantly less average improvement in the Reading Progress test and an actual decrease in the average improvement in the TORCH test. ( Figure 8)

The change in comprehension scores between the 2 groups was significant and there were much stronger improvements shown in the intervention group with all students except one demonstrating higher raw scores and percentile rankings in both the Torch and Reading Progress tests. Only two children in the control group were able to demonstrate this general improvement and two others returned a lower or unchanged test score in both tests.



**Figure 8**

Interestingly, all 10 students improved considerably in the synonym tests with an average improvement of 27.6 words in the intervention group and 28 words for the control group. The paraphrasing activity showed a different picture with the intervention group improving by an average of 6.5 words compared to 2.25 words for the control group and this result in the control group was directly attributed the improvement of student K. (Figure 6)



**Figure 9**

## Discussion

The results gained during this study would suggest that there is support for the hypothesis that the explicit teaching of the use of synonyms and paraphrasing to grade 3/4 children with reading difficulties improves their comprehension. There were considerable gains during the course of the study in the ability of the children to use synonyms and paraphrase sentences and to some extent paragraphs. All students in the intervention group improved in both the use of synonyms and paraphrasing and all of the participating students who completed the study in the control group improved in the use of synonyms but they did not show the same improvement in the use of paraphrasing.

The resulting improvement in comprehension test scores in the intervention group showed 5 out of 6 students improving in both comprehension tests as opposed to 2 out of 4 improving to some degree in the control group whilst the 2 others actually scored at a lower level in both tests. This improvement is supported by the work of Katims and Harris (1997) who found that the Paraphrasing strategy has been demonstrated to significantly increase the reading comprehension of students with and without learning difficulties. This study would indicate that to achieve significant increases in comprehension the intervention would need to be extended over a much longer and more consistent period than was available in this study.

Gee (1998) states that not all students acquire reading strategies automatically and need explicit instructions, this is supported in this study by the results of those in the intervention group. However it was interesting to note that the use of synonyms seemed to be a skill that was very attainable by students with minimal explicit teaching as the results of the control group would indicate with some excellent improvements over the study period particularly student J, K & L. The extension of this ability into use in sentences and paragraphs is the strategy that would require more explicit teaching. This is nevertheless a consideration worth keeping in mind when designing a program for emerging readers as the use of synonyms successfully could also be a considerable boost to the self efficacy of students are struggling in other areas of reading.

This study found that students with reading difficulties have problems in gaining the meaning of text as a block when it came to paraphrasing. The step of including synonyms as substitute words within sentence may be a strategy that will need explicit teaching for quite a period of time before the students are able to express the main ideas of the passage in their own words.

All of the students in this study were still at the stage of word for word translations which as Fink and Hurst (2003) point out, is not true paraphrasing. The students in the intervention group were not able to order their thoughts enough to select the most important parts of the text to reword into their own words. It is this ordering of thoughts that needs to occur before students can even begin to make the necessary links with prior and existing experiences and knowledge that Fountas and Pinnell (2001) state are necessary for improved comprehension to be achieved. Readers will comprehend texts more easily if they can make these links with their reality; this is difficult at a word by word translation level.

The students in this study had some difficulty in understanding the meaning of many of the words they were attempting to replace with synonyms. This lack of an extensive word bank is going to provide a considerable stumbling block for students attempting to find new ways to interpret texts. It would be necessary to work consistently on increasing the word bank of students at the same time as developing their paraphrasing or synonym skills.

The intervention group students enjoyed learning the RAP acronym and they all were able to repeat it and articulate what it meant. It was an aid in reinforcing positive self talk and it was an achievable learning. The use of this acronym or its explanation by the students, however, did not necessarily mean they understood why it was a good thing to learn or to use when they were reading. This strategy was used consistently throughout the study and it was discussed at length during many of the sessions but it was not evident that the students actually saw the relevance of it or the links between the strategy and their reading. Fisk and Hurst ( 2003 ) state that students will benefit not only from knowing why paraphrasing is helpful but that actually seeing the practical applications of accurately restating another person's ideas will motivate them to use the strategy more readily. These students were not able to demonstrate this level of understanding after the 10 sessions and would require considerably more work to reach this stage of understanding.

As the paraphrasing strategy was taught, the skill of visualising was strongly emphasised as an aid to getting a clearer picture of what was happening in the text. Interestingly student A & D stated regularly that they liked getting a picture in their mind before they found a synonym for a word and they were two of the students who improved considerably in their post comprehension tests. Student E consistently wanted to write her answer without stopping and thinking and would not have a go if she didn't have an instant answer, interestingly her comprehension post test results showed the least change across the study. It would be

interesting to pursue this visualising skill in more depth with this group and especially student E as another strategy to use in their reading to ascertain if any considerable difference would occur in comprehension or paraphrasing ability.

The importance of teacher feedback and positive reinforcement was very important in this research. The excitement being “chosen” to help the principal in an important university study was quickly overtaken by the reality of being involved in "school work". Ensuring that explicit feedback was positive and understandable meant that the sessions included many breaks and discussions to clarify progress. Lee and Von Colln (2003) state that corrective feedback is essential to students' improved use of this paraphrasing strategy. Students in this study were encouraged to give feedback to others consistently to improve the responses that were shared. An interesting further study could investigate the results of different forms of feedback to students in their attempts at paraphrasing. This study would suggest that enthusiastic and positive sharing of ideas and peer feedback is as important as teacher feedback. The results and interest level of the control group would also suggest that a lack of input and feedback as to why students are doing what they are in class could greatly affect their response to tasks and test situations. In this instance there was a distinct lack of interest and enthusiasm for the post tests from the control group, this is most likely a reflection of what can often happen in a classroom where some students slip under the radar and receive little or no explicit individual teaching or feedback despite being in a classroom where quality teaching is taking place. These students are most likely our readers with difficulties who most need this explicit teaching of a range of reading strategies and the feedback to encourage their consistent use.

The results of this study do support the benefits of teaching paraphrasing and the use of synonyms to improve comprehension. They also indicate that short periods of intervention are probably not the answer and that ongoing explicit teaching is necessary over a prolonged period of time to both ensure that sound reading strategies are in place and that there is adequate understanding of why these strategies are good, why they will help a student's reading and how they actually fit into the realm of improving comprehension. It is this movement from the ability to “use” a strategy like synonyms to seeing the bigger picture of main ideas within a text that is the great leap forward in improved comprehension. This is quite a leap to make and requires considerable ongoing support.

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## Resources

Texts:

Cowley, J. ( 2004) Troy's Movie. Australia, Mimosa / McGraw-Hill

Giles, J. (1999) The Talent Quest. PM Level 24, Australia, Nelson.

Hayden,J. (2003) Food Chains. Focus 5 Set A., Australia, Nelson

Justus, J. ( 2004) Our Solar System. Australia, Mimosa / McGraw-Hill

Powell, J (1998) Weather – Rain and Us. U.Kingdom, Belitha Press

Mossenson, Stephanou, Forster, Masters, McGregor, Anderson and Hill. (1987) **TORCH Tests of Reading Comprehension**. Melb: ACER

Grade 3	Grasshoppers
Grade 4	Lizards love Eggs
Grade 3/4	At the zoo

Vincent, D, Crumpler, M, De la Mare, M (1997) **Reading Progress Test**  
London: Hodder Murray

### **Paraphrasing Task**

John Munro. Group Test

### **Synonyms Task**

John Munro. Group Test

## Appendix 1

### Student Information and Results

<b>Student Coding</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Teach / Control Group</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Age in YEARS</b>	<b>Age in MONTHS</b>	<b>ESL ?</b>	<b>Earlier Intervention</b>	<b>EMA</b>
<b>A</b>	<b>M</b>	T	3	8.5	101	N	Reading Rec	N
<b>B</b>	<b>M</b>	T	3	9.2	110	N	Reading Rec	N
<b>C</b>	<b>F</b>	T	4	9.8	116	Y		Y
<b>D</b>	<b>M</b>	T	4	9.6	114	N		Y
<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	T	4	9.3	111	Y		N
<b>F</b>	<b>F</b>	T	4	9.4	112	Y	Reading Rec	Y
<b>G</b>	<b>F</b>	C	3	8.6	102	N	Reading Rec	N
<b>H</b>	<b>F</b>	C	3	8.11	107	N	Reading Rec	N
<b>I</b>	<b>F</b>	C	3	8.11	107	N		Y
<b>J</b>	<b>M</b>	C	3	8.5	101	Y		N
<b>K</b>	<b>F</b>	C	4	9.5	113	Y	Reading Rec	N
<b>L</b>	<b>M</b>	C	4	9.5	113	Y		N



## Appendix 2

### Lesson Structures for Paraphrasing

#### Lesson 1.

##### *Oral session*

Introduce the Term Synonym. Ask the students to verbalise the term.

Present what synonyms do and why they can be important in helping us understand text.

Present a list of words on a poster to find synonyms for:

**Chair, hot, bright, rough, happy, fast, loud, motor, etc**

Teacher models: Use of synonyms and articulating what he is doing.

Students orally find other words to replace these.

Introduce.. Listen to the word, say it to your self, close your eyes picture it / ask yourself about the word, Verbalise an alternative.

Listen to a part of a story.

Use the text: **The Talent Quest. By Jenny Giles (PM level 24)**

Ensure that the story is well introduced so that the students do have a chance to draw on prior understandings.

Teacher stops and asks for substitute words for identified words. At each pause ask the students to repeat the same steps as above.

**Conclusion:** Students verbalise their learning from the sessions and why they think this learning might help them.

#### Session 2

##### *Oral session*

Revise the meaning of synonyms

Ask some students to remember what they did and what they learned at the last session.

Repeat the activity from session 1 using the same text but continuing further into the story.

**Conclusion:** Students verbalise their learning from the sessions and why they think this learning might help them.

### **Session 3**

Mainly Oral session

Review Meaning of Synonyms

Review the process we are using to find new substitute words.

Read a non-fiction text and look to find synonyms as we read.

Use the text: Big Book. “**Our Solar System**” by **Julie-Anne Justus**

Teacher reads and models the use of synonyms at strategic parts of the text.

Students contribute alternative words as a group.

**Conclusion:** Students verbalise their learning from the session and why they think this learning might help them.

### **Session 4**

Revise the synonym definition again.

Teacher articulates why using these words can help as a reading strategy.

Students articulate their understanding of the reasons for using this strategy.

Work in pairs with a short paragraph from the text.

Text used: Big Book. “**Our Solar System**” by **Julie-Anne Justus**

Read the text to your partner.

Partner chooses words from the text to find synonyms for and then shares their suggestions.

Students choose the best suggestions to share at the end of this activity.

Each person has a turn with his or her short paragraph.

Share each person’s paragraph with substituted words with the group.

**Conclusion:** Students verbalise their learning from the session and why they think this learning might help them.

## **Session 5.**

Begin to look at sentences and re word them using synonyms and linking the ideas from the sentence to maintain the meaning.

Use the text: “**Troy’s Movie**” by Joy Cowley

Teacher reads a sentence and models paraphrasing it.

Discuss what strategy you used.

**Read the text**

**Ask your self** about it and what it means

**Put the ideas** from the sentence into your own words and change as many of those words as you can.

As a group ask the students to have a go at a sentence.

Discuss alternatives and write down the best alternative we can come up with as a group.

Discuss why it is the best.

Work in pairs and take sentences from the text to change

Share your best-paraphrased sentences with the group

Teacher introduces the acronym RAP to help remind the students of the strategy they can use.

Students asked to verbalise this acronym and what it stands for from a poster.

**Conclusion:** Students verbalise their learning from the session and why they think this learning might help them.

## **Session: 6**

Revise RAP strategy

As a group activity. Students take turns in reading a paragraph and asking the next person to have a go at paraphrasing it.

Use the familiar text: “**The Talent Quest**”

Teacher reads a paragraph and models paraphrasing it.

Discuss what strategy you used.

**Read the text**

**Ask your self** about it and what it means

Put the ideas from the paragraph into your own words and change as many of those words as you can.

As a group ask the students to have a go at a paragraph.

Discuss alternatives and write down the best alternative we can come up with as a group.

Discuss why it is the best.

Work in pairs and take a paragraph to change.

Share your paraphrased paragraph with the group

**Conclusion:** Students verbalise their learning from the session and why they think this learning might help them.

### **Session 7:**

Revise the RAP acronym and the synonym meaning.

Teacher repeats one of the group paraphrasing successes from lesson 6.

Teacher models articulating the strategy aloud

***“When I read I ask my self what the text is about and what it means. I then try to put it into my own word to make it make sense to me.”***

Students have the opportunity to articulate their understanding of the RAP strategy.

Teacher discusses with the students reasons for using this strategy.

Students are given a paragraph from the same text: Big Book. “ **Our Solar System**” by

**Julie-Anne Justus**

They read the text individually and try to paraphrase it.

Teacher moves around and asks the students individually what they are doing in their heads as they read..... Ask the student to articulate the RAP strategy as they work.

Ask them why they are using this strategy.

Share paragraphs and consider other ways of paraphrasing some ideas in them.

**Conclusion:** Students verbalise their learning from the session and why they think this learning might help them.

## **Session 8:**

Revise the RAP strategy

Teacher reads whole paragraphs and asks students as a group to pick out the main ideas being conveyed in the text. Share these ideas and clarify as a group.

Use the text Weather: *Rain and Us* by Jillian Powell

Students work individually from cards made from the paragraphs in this text to identify the main ideas. Now put these ideas in your own words.

### ***Complete a worksheet***

Paragraph:	Main meaning in this. What is it about?	In my own words...
Thunderstorms can bring heavy rain. The electricity in lightning can heat up the air quickly, and the air makes a booming sound. Thunderclouds carry big Raindrops.	Storms bring rain. Lightning heats the air The heat makes the booming sound. The raindrops are big.	?????

Share student ideas with the group.

Conclusion: Students verbalise their learning from the session and why they think this learning might help them.

## **Session 9:**

Revise the RAP strategy by telling a partner how it works and why it is useful.

Ask students to tell the group what their partner said.

Complete one paragraph as a group and ask students to say out loud what they are doing as they work through it. Explain the value of "Talking to yourself" to make things clearer and more meaningful.

Discuss the fact that there is little use in reading words if we do not know what they are trying to say to us.

Complete some Oral paraphrasing practice from the text *Troy's Movie* by Joy Cowley.

Divide this story into parts and have the students work individually to paraphrase it so that we can put the story back together. Does it still give the same message and is it even more clear to us now????

**Conclusion:** Students verbalise their learning from the session and why they think this learning might help them.

## **Session 10**

Revise synonyms and paraphrasing as useful strategies in helping us to understand what we are reading.

Use the text **“RAIN and Us”** by **Jillian Powell**.

There are many short factual paragraphs in this text.

As a group share some fun in paraphrasing these as quickly as we can after saying what we are doing

***Eg: I am reading the text and asking myself what it is about.***

***It is about.....***

***I can change it to read like this.....***

Ask each child to articulate what the ten sessions have taught them.

What will this do for them when they read?????

Will you use it when you are reading by yourself...??? Why??

Will you be talking to yourself inside your head???

## Appendix 3

Sample card used in lessons to help with Oral paraphrasing activities.

Students work in groups and pairs to complete.

<i>Paragraph:</i>	<i>Main meaning in this. What is it about?</i>	<i>In my own words...</i>
Thunderstorms can bring heavy rain. The electricity in lightning can heat up the air quickly, and the air makes a booming sound. Thunderclouds carry big Raindrops.	Storms bring rain. Lightning heats the air The heat makes the booming sound. The raindrops are big.	?????